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Interview with Mark Vanderpool

Mark Vanderpool

Kate Hitchcock

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ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

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Researcher's Name: Kate Hitchcock

Event: Interview with Mark Vanderpool, AC Teacher

Place: Alternative Center

Date: December 16, 1999

K: Just to start off with some basic biographical information of your education and how you came to this job.

M: I grew up in Northern Ohio but I went to college at Bowling Green. I taught four years in a couple of different school districts in the state of Ohio in the mid-to-late 70's. In 1979 I moved to the state of Oregon and taught out there for 20 years. Areas of English, Health, and Physical Education. I've kind of balanced that out over 23 years working from preschool all the way through high school seniors. It's probably equal as far as the amount of physical education primarily on the elementary level and teaching high school English. I moved back to Ohio this past summer mainly because I want to be closer to my family. Just some health related issues for my parents and I just wanted to be a little bit closer to them. I took years leave of absence from my position in Oregon and I was basically surfing the web and came upon this position and investigated it and now I'm here.

K: If you could describe for me the purpose of the Alternative Center as you see it?

M: It's an opportunity for everybody involved, the students, the parents, the administration from the district that the students are coming from, all of them to maybe end up with somewhat of a win situation. I think that students, for whatever reason are sent here, then it gives them an opportunity to instead of maybe being expelled from school that they have an opportunity to continue working toward that ultimate goal of either reaching a diploma or a GED.

K: Compared to their home school what do you think they're missing?

M: Social interaction with other kids. More choices, I think. The setting where basically they are in carrows at work by themselves with very little interaction with other students. In some instances very little interactions with the adults that are working here. I think they are somewhat isolated in this environment and I think they are missing out on those types of settings. Academically where I'm working students in literature and they are missing out on the reading and discussion with other students and with the instructor to an extent. Going over information, maybe getting some other suggestions on interpretations or highlighting certain aspects of a piece of literature. I really think they are missing out on those types of opportunities. I am hoping to incorporate some good work here but you can't come right in and change things.

K: What do you see that they gain by the structure?

M: I guess it goes back to my previous answer. When they think they're given the opportunity to continue working toward educational goals whether those are goals of society or maybe an individual goal for themselves to finish with a diploma or the GED. So the school has not kicked them out and said you don't have a chance for an education.

K: Can you describe for me the roles and interactions of different people here? The probation officers, the teachers, and the counselors.

M: I'm pretty vague on that one except for maybe the teachers. Basically we're facilitators or some senses I feel like I'm proctoring a study hall. It's my responsibility to make sure they are following the centers rules whether it comes to dress or behavior or whatever then certainly the academic aspect of it for those kids that are working with me toward whether it be Health, Physical Education, or English. As far as their probation officers I really don't have a grip on that responsibility is. I know that the court has assigned some students here and that the probation officers are serving as a liaison between the school and the judicial system.

K: Do you see certain similarities in the students that are here?

M: Yes not all the way through but I do see similarities between from some students. I guess I'll start at the bottom and go to the top. There are a number of students that are very angry and they want to project their anger out on everybody else. Of those students I don't remember them ever accepting any blame and I've only been here for 7 weeks or so. I've worked with students of that nature at other schools and other setting so generally it's the same pattern. They are hostile. They are very angry. They don't want to accept any responsibility for their behavior or for their anger. Their defense mechanism is to yell, scream, be obnoxious, and they can be obnoxious in a quiet way I guess but generally there's that group. They're academic ability ranges. There's some that are extremely low and that's part of their frustration and anger. If I get into arguments then we don't really have to deal with the real issue which is my low academic performance and try to improve that. Then there are some that are very academically capable and they use that anger because they really just don't want to do the work and so we can postpone that and detour around the work if we get into a confrontation. The other extreme and I'm noticing this by the older students, that for whatever reason or reasons they have decided that it's time to take care of some work. It's time to do the academics and do what needs to be done and I can think of several kids that are just always working, always on task, and wanting to get something gone. They are seeking me out to see what needs to be done next if I haven't gotten back to them soon enough. Their quality of work ranges too but generally though it certainly at the lowest of a standard C or an average type grade on up to some that would probably be us in the A range in a regular setting and then there are some that have fallen between those two extremes.

K: Do you get syllabus for them each week?

M: Actually I start out with a syllabus for like English 8th grade, 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grade so when I have a student that just finished a 10th grade syllabus and he approached me this morning and he's starting to work on the 11th grade and when he finishes that then he'll come and get the 12th grade and it's taken him about 12 weeks to do the 10th grade and I think that and I shared with him both the 11th and 12th grade today so he knows what to look forward to and _

K: What year would he be in at his home school?

M: He would be a 12th grader. He's trying to finish three English credits during this school year. That's my approach with him. I've been able to just give him the syllabus, he takes it and may come back and question an assignment or maybe a different story for one that I have in the syllabus and depending on the situation I will deal with that. Some students in generally lower grade level and not always but generally lower academic level they need the day by day type situation so it's just "this is what I want you to do today". Sometimes I find that even giving them a week is too much so then I go to a day routine. I might offer them a week. One of my frustration, and it's not just with the kids at this school is giving them an assignment and then the goal for a student is to get the assignment done. Whatever the ability level they express on the assignment doesn't matter to them, the assignment is done as far as they are concerned the issue is over with and it's closed. I don't care in Spelling if I got 1 out of 20 correct. He told me I was going to take a Spelling test. It was going to be 20 words. I took it, 20 words and I'm done. Okay so I spelled one word right. There's no desire there for them to do quality work. That's a frustration and again it goes way beyond just the kids at this school.

K: Do you try to give them feedback on how they did?

M: Yes if they allow me and you go back to the extremes of having the very angry student who doesn't want that feedback. You know I don't know why you bother me with this I don't want to listen to it. I've had students where I've had to send to Podville because all I wanted to do was talk with them. An assignment comes back and this happened a week ago. She got five correct out of 16. It wasn't my subject area it was Science and so I had a copy of the science test and called the student up and was just going to go over some strategies like studying the questions at the end. I was showing her how the textbook writers and that their purpose is not to trick you. They are giving you the information either in bold face or italics or whatever the information is. They are giving you the information that they are saying is going to be important. Here's the summary at the end and here are the questions at the end. Read those and take notes on that information and take notes before you read the chapter and then you'll have an idea of what they want. She would not let me get two words out and again her anger came out and defense mechanism and boom. She put me in a position where I had to send her upstairs to Podville. I was thinking how ridiculous. I came up twice that day to see if she was ready to listen to me. I'm going to share this with you. You can do it now and come back downstairs and work and she didn't want any part of it. It was a Friday and the first thing Monday morning she walked in and she was in a little bit of a better mood and I brought her over, sat her down and she rolled her eyes but she listened. Yes, when they allow me to I give them feedback. Some of them don't want that. I don't know if that from what they experienced previously here or in a previous education setting.

K: What do you see as the primary factors maybe not students misconduct as much as anger but behind that? Whether it be the family, the school system that they're from or_?

M: Well our environment plays a huge role so it's going to be all aspects of our environment. Whether it's the home life, the social environment outside the home or outside of the school all those different settings come into play. Reasons for that and why they choose to display it I think

are multiple also. I think sometimes I'm an authority figure and they're just not in the mood to have an authority figure deal with them. Whether it's saying hi to them and they want to combat that or trying to help them do their work. Sometimes it's for show. Whether it's for show for the other kids that are in the classroom or if it's for show for the kids that they hang out with when they're not in school. I have a kid who got sent to Podville three times last week. For some kids that's probably a badge of honor to some extent depending who they're socially in with. It can be their home or outside influences away from the school or the school and so your battling all those things. Percentage wise how many times are they going to come in and available to learn that day? When they are unavailable to learn the chances are they're going to be discipline situation. Some of them are a little bit somber in their behaviors than others. If I'm not doing it then I'm not causing any trouble then why are you bothering me? _____ if I'm not bothering you and I'm not bothering anybody else why don't you just let me exist. I do find it frustrating that, I mean I know that some of these kids have gone through some very challenging times and continue to go through challenging times and I have a tremendous amount of empathy for them but that doesn't mean that you continue to make that choice _____. It's doesn't mean that when an environment is set up for you where you can make good choices then you want to fight that. There are people in this world that would love to change places with any of these kids because their environment or situation is much worse. They just think poor me, me, me and their view towards society and the world and maybe lack of respect life in general is something I find troubling too.

K: How do you use Podville?

M: I think that it's okay for a student to disagree with me but it's how they disagree with me. It's okay if they say I don't feel like doing that work and I just tell them well you need to do that work. When they become rude, disorderly, and uncooperative those are the time that I check my folder and I'm sure each one of those gets checked. I don't like loud, obnoxious, rude behavior and so I think the last time was one day last week. A girl was in a situation where she was frustrated with paperwork and two belonged on my desk and the other two on by assistants desk and she just threw them in the air and where ever they landed they landed and she went back to her desk. Now that was pretty simple. There's things on the floor, your responsible for them and you need to pick them up and I just looked over at her and said I wasn't going to wait too long until you meet my expectations of you and come over and pick them up and put them where they belong. She just sat there. I told her that she needed to correct the matter or she would be going upstairs. She chose to challenge me and had to go upstairs but on the way out the door I stopped her and I said that she still had not picked the paper up. I think rude behavior is my number one reason and being uncooperative. I'd really like for them to learn that it's okay to disagree but just because you disagree with somebody you don't have to be obnoxious about it. Talk to me in a civil way. If you want to make an adjustment to your syllabus or to the work that you're doing then talk to me in a way that I'm going to want to listen to your words. I think and I've spent the last eight years teaching elementary physical education (K-4 for the most part). Part of the thing that I've worked with most with kids was conflict resolution and yeah we did all the PE stuff for sure but conflict resolution was the number one thing. Whether it's in playing a game and having kids shout and scream and get ugly in someone's face because they didn't catch a ball playing baseball. My approach to them always was, "it's your teammate, do you want them to do it better? If I yell and scream at you like the way that you were yelling and screaming at them are you going to listen to my words or are you just going to see the anger in my voice and in my face and gestures"? That's

all your concerned about is my anger so you stop listening to my words. Tell them in a way that they're going to want to listen. That's what I tried to work with those kids and what I'd like for these kids to learn. I also think that if we approach the elementary school students with that type of attitude and are demonstrative of that in our own behaviors then that type of behavior will be less as time goes on.

K: How effective do you think Podville is as a deterrent?

M: I think it's effective. Most of the time the kids come back with a little different of an attitude. Sometimes it takes them a little longer. Some kids, those that are here via the courts, then the probation officer intervenes and says if you come up to Podville again then it's going to be this consequence and so a little twist of the arm there so to speak. I noticed kids coming with a little different attitude then too. I think if they are causing a disruption in class they need to be removed somehow. When they're removed then we're loosing academic opportunities and so I think in some situations, like we had a student the other day that didn't call in, she was sick but the penalty was Podville. She'd been working really well academically and I was afraid that sending her to Podville may damage that type of attitude toward doing the work and I voiced my concerns about that but from an administrators point of view I can understand that you still need to follow through and send her to Podville. It ended up working out okay she was up their only part of the day and came back down and did her work. My follow-up conversation with the director was that I understood the need for discipline but number one they missed one day of school because they weren't here, number two if they send her to Podville they miss two. I would rather they be in the classroom on day #2 and come up to Podville in the evening and then it's taking away from their time. If you take away from there time then_ Most of them buy into the situation that from 8:30-2:00 I'm in school so they don't view that as their time but after 2 o'clock it's their time and I think when you start messing with the carrot then they're attitudes a little different. That goes way beyond school too.

K: What kind of information is shared with you about the student? What do you find out them?

M: There's a folder and generally there's information in the folder if I want to seek that out to some extent. There is some privacy involved there. Generally it's available as to why they're there and I generally don't make an effort to worry about that too much. Maybe it the students been in my classroom a day or two and there has been some behaviors that I question then I might go ahead with that and see why there here and go from there. Basically that's it. Really a lot of the kids who are sent through the courts I really don't know too much about.

K: Do you see that the students are treated here when they return to their home school? Whether it is by their teachers or their peers.

M: That's a good question and I don't really know that. I guess my hope would be and you just can't ignore it. I have a hard time using regular and normal in this case because there are regular and normal here too. If I were a teacher in a home school and I had a student coming back then I'd always be cognizant of that but it wouldn't necessarily have an effect on how I treated them. I may look at their work and maybe by chance they're doing better work while they were here. Going

through the different types and ways people learn then I may try to gear some of my lessons more toward that type of learning style so that maybe they could do better a job academically. It's geared more toward their learning style. That's one thing with the present set up that I'm struggling with is the lack of flexibility in teaching because it's really just a one on one situation at best and some people need to learn differently. This really doesn't allow that and am hoping that with time maybe we can take a look at that. As far as the kids and peers my guess is for those that are not on house arrest that there peers anyway on weekends, evenings, and so forth. There's still that connecting bond. I would think that some probably have a negative perception of this as kind of like, if you go there then there's something really bad and wrong with you and that's not necessarily the case.

K: In terms of your transition from traditional school to this type, how difficult was that? What concessions have you had to make or_?

M: Teaching elementary physical education I was used to getting maybe 200 hugs a day and now I'm getting verbally abused 200 times a day. That's probably the change for me. I like to have an atmosphere in my classroom where there's a lot of freedom and openness and I want it to be an enjoyable environment. I have always been successful with that. You can have a group of 25 kids and maybe 18 are happy and 7 aren't. You probably can't reach them all. Here I guess what comes naturally comes to me is to try and be a warm and friendly and caring person and that's not always wanted or well received in this environment. That's something I'm needing to deal with.

K: Was it a shock coming here and seeing that difference or did you kind of anticipate it?

M: I don't know if it was a shock. I didn't know what to anticipate. I didn't know what was going to happen and I've been fortunate there's been upwards of 6-7 kids in my class at a time and if history continues to repeat in the springtime there's going to be more and I think that you double or triple that amount it's going to have an impact on what's available in the classroom.

K: Have you had a feel of the recent shift in whether it be the discipline to more counseling or?

M: I think they did hire a counselor who is having several session a day with kids and he came on board about a week after I started and so I know there is that shift and I certainly think that needed very much. I would _____. We were in one meeting about the second week after I was here and several probation officers were here and there was a comment from a probation officer that in the classroom you had to be a boom, boom, boom, and with an iron fist type thing and if they need a hug or a pat on the back then send them up and we'll give it to them. I want us all to be able to that I don't want education where it's militaristic. Where I have to roll up an iron fist. I don't want it to be that way. I want them to find it to be a warm, friendly environment. I think learning will be better for them there.

K: Actually my observations of the school are that I see it as an effort to try to balance the discipline of a students with the education. Do you see that one overrides or overtakes?

M: I think discipline overrides because I don't see as much concern for improving academic work. You have a stack of work sheets and as long as your busy working on them nobody's going to bother you. Again it doesn't matter how many of those I get correct or wrong but if I do my

work sheets and don't cause any trouble or draw attention to myself then I'm going to be okay. If I stop doing that or if I'm causing trouble as I'm doing it then there's going to be some consequences for that. But if I do that and take my test, hand it and whether I get 5% or whatever correct that doesn't seem to matter and I find that unsettling right now. To answer your questions that indicates that it's more disciplinary than it is academic. I also see that Mr. Marshall is giving me a lot of flexibility to make some changes but I'm trying to make them slowly. I think he's willing to work more toward that emphasis. To me if a student doesn't pass something you don't send him on to the next chapter they need to learn that. If they don't and it's not important enough to us that they learn it then it's not going to be important to them. I think that's one of the dilemmas that we're in and we'll have to hopefully change it.

K: In terms of training for the staff do you wish that you would have more training or preparation for these students or_?

M: No, I'm fine with it. I think in 23 years of education I'm fine with it.

K: Do you think in general for the staff that they should maybe get together to decide how your going to approach these students?

M: We do that. We have staff meetings about every two weeks and we discuss things. I think, again, I'm new on board here and my approach generally is to try and change things slowly and gradually. I want to learn and raise havoc with it. I think Glen is willing to look at those changes. I think over time some other people are going to have to be more accepting of the idea that just to do it is not good enough that we want them to learn. I think that as time goes on that will become more acceptable.

No. As far as being prepared I think the best thing for me was to just come in and experience it and start making adjustments. If I were a beginning teacher, in the first couple of years, I think that for me personally it would have much more difficult.

K: What do you consider a success for the student?

M: I have different goals for different kids in my classroom. For one students it's I want you to work on a _____. I don't want you to continue to be disruptive. That same person I would want to converse with other people in a more appropriate fashion. It doesn't have to be loud and obnoxious and it needs to be some warmth and kindness and _____. When she gets to the point where she's easier to work with in that regard then I can start working with her more and more in academics. Tape too low. She needs to buy into the behavior thing before she's going to grab the educational thing. Some are kids are those that are more academically oriented and in that case I use literature and writing as a way to be able to take another look at our world and ourselves and so all my assignments are either essay form or pretty detailed writing out answers. Do I always get a detailed answer? No, but that's my goal for them is to learn to write out a detailed answer to a question. I really give them the option to personalize the assignment that I give them. To draw examples of there own life and connect that with the story. A student was reading to kill a mocking bird and we dealt with the different issues in the story from racism to social economic levels and the setting of the story and so forth and I think in some respects as he explained to me maybe Mt. Vernon isn't that far away from Malcolm, Alabama at the time that Harper Lee was writing the

story because of views towards different ethnic groups and he made that connection and I felt that was good that he was able to do that. When that happens you feel good.

K: Do you have a personal goal?

M: Teaching for me has always been when my students have reached success then I feel good. I guess, again going back to my individual goals, whether it be behavioral issues or academic issues, then for each one of them as they take the steps toward that then I'll feel okay about that. As far as what do I want it to look like at the end? No, I'm not really sure what I want it to look like at the end. I guess ideally what I'd like for it to look like in the end as that this school doesn't exist because we've solved those problems and that we've done a better job working with the kids in their home school and society and our parenting and our hero selection and who we'd want to emulate and we've been a better job at directing our children and toward more positive role models and so this school doesn't exist. That won't happen before June. I don't think so.

K: In terms of and you named a few things that you would suggest for reform, such as, have the Podville at night for punishment of not coming in or certain things in the classroom but what other things to you have for reform for this school?

M: Again going back to academics, the attitude toward stressing that learning occurs as opposed to just getting work done. I don't know. I'm not sure the carrows are the best idea but maybe they are. I would like the students to mix a little bit more but maybe that's not right or good. I don't know but now the boys are in one section and the girls are in the other. I'd like to maybe do down and group together. I'd really like to have a reading section grouped together. Either meet here or somewhere else, you know maybe 6-10 kids reading the same selection and discussing it. That's one of my goals. If we are trying to prepare them to be successful when they go back to their home school then I think we need to do things that are going to be happening more often in their home school. This isn't the setting too often at a home school. I think we need to some degree pattern that as part of our do so the kids do have that. I let the kids talk for 15 minutes at lunch and that was a big deal, not only for the kids, but it was contested by several of the adults here. I stressed that (end of side one).

in an environment where we can better witness those social skills and then maybe give some direction. For those kids who contest my walking by them then if I notice something in their social skills then I can pass that along to Derek our counselor and then he can, if they are more favorable toward him, then he can direct that. We can use the cannon effect. The kid doesn't know where it comes from but if they get an opportunity to work on that skill and have _____ of what they are doing and what's happening because they are doing it then I don't think you can teach social skills by having a carrow environment.

K: What have you learned from the alternative center?

M: All of the above. I'm not sure if my ideas are the right one's. I'm not sure if I'm the right person for it. I think that I'm doing okay with what I'm doing in the classroom. I plan on certainly going through the end of the school year. I think it's helped me get a better understanding of _____ and at least _____. I do think that my best place is teaching elementary physical education and I

think that my compassion for _____ and for the kids in that area and am very comfortable in that and dealing and I know kids _____ the tension _____ in a situation like this. To spend a little bit of extra time with them and work with them on those skills _____ better communicating and dealing with conflict resolution and so forth. I guess what I'm learning is that's where my best place is and maybe as educators maybe we need to look towards putting some more effort into those areas.

K: Is there anything else you'd like to add about school?

M: No, I would just want to say you were very nice and I enjoyed interviewing with you.
(End of Interview)